

Must We Loathe David Irving?

A Comment

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"The chief problem in historical honesty is not outright lying. It is omission or de-emphasis of important data. The definition of 'important,' of course, depends on one's values." —Howard Zinn, Failure To Quit

This year marks the tenth anniversary of the David Irving - Deborah Lipstadt libel trial. Irving sued Lipstadt and Penguin Books for having called him a "Holocaust Denier" as part of what he claimed was a campaign to ruin his reputation. In his opening statement to the court, he complained that the label Holocaust Denier was a "verbal yellow star," designed to destroy him for being an enemy of what Norman Finkelstein has termed "The Holocaust Industry."

Judge Charles Gray did not agree with Irving, but one hardly needs the sanction of judicial opinion to recognize that the Holocaust Denier label is intended to discredit, not illuminate, in the same way that "nigger" is. What would it mean to prove to the satisfaction of a court that someone "really was" a nigger? Only that racism was alive and well in the judicial system. In a similar way, the court's decision against Irving represents complicity in the demonization of Holocaust heretics, not a victory for history and truth, as was claimed by the capitalist media in the wake of the trial.

No one survives having the denier label affixed to his work, even when one accepts, as Irving does, that the Nazis inflicted appalling carnage on European Jews during World War II. The point of this defamatory label is not the preservation of historical truth (as though historians didn't regularly falsify history to advance the interests of favored states), but the destruction of official enemies. As the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci put it, intellectuals are "experts in legitimation," not scholarship, and historical fact is quite beside the point. Irving had to be "delegitimized" not for his historiography but because he publicly challenged the Holy Trinity of what has become a Holocaust religion: (1) homicidal gas chambers (2) the six million (3) intention to exterminate. The Holocaust Industry does not allow anyone to get away with that.



March 2003: David Irving outside the Public Records office (National Archives) London. Photo is in the public domain. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Predictably, the highlight of the case was Auschwitz and the homicidal gas chambers that are said to have existed there. Irving expressed skepticism that there had been any, while defense attorney Richard Rampton flatly rejected the idea that he had any obligation to build an affirmative case for them:

"I am not here to prove that Auschwitz had gas chambers, homicidal gas chambers. I do not need to do that. If you . . . have an open mind and you look at the convergence of evidence - eyewitness testimony from victims, perpetrators, and the contemporaneous documentary evidence and the archeological remains - you are going to conclude, as a matter of probability at the very least, that indeed what the eyewitnesses tell us is true."

Of course, as my co-blogger Frank Scott points out, this is magical thinking, and a prescription for reducing history to mythology, to wit:

"I am not here to prove that Jesus Christ rose from the dead. I do not need to do that. If you . . . have an open mind and you look at the convergence of evidence - eyewitness testimony from those who saw the empty tomb, Roman perpetrators of the murder, and the contemporaneous documentary evidence and the archeological remains - you are going to conclude that what the Bible tells us is true."

In the text of his decision Judge Gray admitted he was predisposed to believe in homicidal gas chambers (both sides in the Holocaust controversy agree that there were gas chambers to control disease). "I have to confess that, in common I suspect with most other people," wrote Gray, "I had supposed that the evidence of mass extermination of Jews in the gas chambers at Auschwitz was compelling." The judge would have rendered a great public service had he inquired into exactly why a majority of people had come to believe in something whose material basis Gray himself admitted was largely absent. In any case, his predisposition to believe combined with the vast manpower advantage enjoyed by Lipstadt and Penguin Books, made the trial's outcome easy to predict.

To arrive at the conclusion that homicidal gas chambers existed, the judge accepted the legitimacy of a David Ray Griffin-style "cumulative proof," which dispensed with the need to find or cite direct evidence - a great convenience. Thus, the defense did not have to suffer the embarrassment of being unable to produce photographs of the homicidal gas chambers or their physical remains, nor contemporary German documents discussing the myriad complexities involved in (allegedly) systematically exterminating millions of people with an industrial assembly line of death.

In effect, the judge asserted that since solid evidence for the homicidal gas chambers was lacking, flimsy evidence would have to do. "The consequence of the absence of any overt documentary evidence of gas chambers at these camps, coupled with the lack of archeological evidence, means that reliance has to be placed on eyewitness and circumstantial evidence . . ."

But of course no one *has* to grant eyewitness testimony and circumstantial evidence the power to decide the case. After all, a cumulative proof based on inferential speculation is not nearly as convincing as an argument employing direct evidence, and it is curious that an alleged program of industrial extermination should be so lacking in such evidence. Judge Gray, who appeared eager to avoid having to judge historical questions, missed an opportunity to sidestep the thorny gas chamber question by pointing out the dubious nature of a cumulative proof.

Instead, he endorsed a speculative case based squarely on circumstantial evidence and eyewitness testimony, much of it patently ridiculous, which concluded that there "must have been" homicidal gas chambers. Accepting the validity of "must have been," of course, requires a certain leap of faith, which the trial's much invoked "objective, fair-minded historian" should not have required.

Judge Gray asserted that there was a "convergence" of evidence "which is to the ordinary, dispassionate mind overwhelming that hundreds of thousands of Jews were systematically gassed to death at Auschwitz." But in the very next breath he issued a qualification that ought to be posted at the entrance of every Holocaust museum in the world: ". . . the contemporaneous documents, such as drawings, plans, correspondence with contractors and the like, yield little clear evidence of the existence of gas chambers designed to kill humans. Such isolated references to the use of gas as are to be found amongst these documents can be explained by the need to fumigate clothes so as to reduce the incidence of diseases such as typhus." It's a wonder Lipstadt didn't accuse *the judge* of being a Holocaust Denier.

As for the eyewitness evidence, even the Lipstadt-Penguin team had to concede that it was not exactly sound. "The Defendants recognise that not all of the evidence which I have sought to summarise above is altogether reliable," wrote Judge Gray. "This applies with particular force to the evidence of the eyewitnesses." He found that "witnesses may have repeated and even embellished the (invented) accounts of other witnesses with the consequence that a corpus of false testimony is built up." Nevertheless, he concluded that the "cumulative effect of the documentary evidence for the genocidal operation of the gas chambers at Auschwitz is considerable." How a stream of evidence heavily contaminated by "false testimony" leads an unprejudiced mind to belief rather than skepticism was left rather unclear by the judge.

Irving tried to get the case back on a material footing, but judge Gray rejected his contention that the absence of (venting) holes in the roof of the morgue at Auschwitz's crematorium 2 meant that no mass gassing operation could have taken place there. ". . . the apparent absence of evidence of holes in the roof at crematorium 2 falls short of being a good reason for rejecting the *cumulative effect* of the evidence on which the Defendants rely." (emphasis added.) Defense witness Robert Jan van Pelt suggested that the holes were cemented in in the fall of 1944. Irving responded scathingly: "So what you are saying is with the Red Army just over the River Vistula ever since November 1944 and about to invade and the personnel of Auschwitz concentration camp in a blue funk and destroying their records and doing what they can, some *SS Rottenfuhrer* has been given the rotten job of getting up there with a bucket and spade and cementing in those four holes - in case after we have blown up the building they show?"

On the issue of intentionality, the judge disagreed with Irving about Hitler allegedly not knowing about the "extermination" of the Jews. He claimed that Irving's ideological convictions distorted his historical findings, allegedly on purpose.

If indeed Irving was guilty of this, that makes him very much *like historians in general*, who regularly falsify the historical record to protect the reputation of their favored states, often quite deliberately. Consider the fact that American historians - for 200 years! - didn't even mention that Washington deliberately destroyed North American Indian nations.

That's deliberate falsification.

There are plenty of other examples.

What about the six million? Holocaust death tolls were calculated in the aggregate, based on estimated population sizes. Wrote Judge Gray: "(Christopher) Browning advanced what is in effect a demographic argument in support of the Defendants' contention that Jews were exterminated in the gas chambers at the death camps in vast numbers. He calculated the approximate number who were deported from western European countries and removed from the ghettos of Poland; he asserted that contemporaneous evidence proves that many of them were transported to Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka . . ." Those unaccounted for were presumed dead in the Holocaust. ". . . since they were never heard of again, *Browning considers it reasonable to infer* that they were put to death in the camps" (emphasis added).

But how accurate were the "estimated" population sizes and the "approximate" number of deportees? Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem claims it has the names of three million European Jews who died during WWII - including those who died from natural causes - which constitutes only half of the deaths routinely attributed to the Holocaust. What about the other half? Irving claimed that the Jewish death toll at the hands of the Nazis was between one and four million. Since the upper end of his range exceeds the numbers from Yad Vashem, why is his view considered scandalous? Furthermore, presumed dead is not the same as proven murdered, much less "exterminated" in gas chambers. There are many ways to die, especially in a war zone.

The defense attempted to prove that Irving not only distorted and falsified history, but that he did so from a motive to rehabilitate and resuscitate Nazism. (The hysteria that "it" is about to happen again is routinely used to deflect serious questions about what exactly "it" refers to in the first place.) But Judge Gray stated that, though racist, Irving was not guilty of inciting racist violence. "I accept that Irving is not obsessed with race. He has certainly not condoned or excused racist violence or thuggery. But he has on many occasions spoken in terms which are plainly racist."

If true, this makes him much like Lipstadt, who opposes intermarriage and condones the founding of a Jewish apartheid state on Palestinian land. Unlike democratic states, Israel is not the state of its citizens, but the state of the Jewish people wherever they happen to be. The Palestinian Arabs are just in the way. Hence the genocidal attempt to eradicate their culture, which is a means of getting them to "voluntarily" leave, so they can be replaced by Jewish immigrants from around the world. In short, Lipstadt's racism supports the infliction of a massive injustice, while Irving's does not.

Furthermore, nothing could have been more ironic than the defense's attempt to smear Irving as an unreconstructed Nazi, dedicated to resurrecting the Hitler regime. For while Irving did nothing more serious than give talks, Germany led a successful campaign in the Balkans throughout the 1990s to promote ethnic homogeneity by force, a bedrock Nazi principle, ultimately dismembering Yugoslavia into ethnic statelets under foreign control, a policy which was (1) illegal (2) based on a demonized caricature of the Serbs that showed a striking resemblance to Nazi propaganda in the 1940s (3) carried out in alliance with the descendants of Hitler's Muslim and Croatian allies, justly famous for drug trafficking, kidnapping, rape, and murder.

In 1999, just months before the Lipstadt-Irving trial began the *Luftwaffe* bombed Yugoslavia on the pretext that Germany was overcoming its evil past and becoming a "normal nation" (i.e., an aggressive one) by attacking a Serbian Hitler (Slobodan Milosevic) who was allegedly committing genocide, though

the fact of the matter was that there were no refugees during the last five months of peace and the internally displaced persons fleeing the three-way ethnic conflict numbered only a few thousand. But in the cartoon-like morality play shown on Western T.V., the Serbs were cast as Oriental barbarians, while the Croats and Muslims starred as their perpetually innocent victims.

German leaders announced that precisely because of the German role in the Holocaust, they had to abandon Berlin's pledge to forever renounce the use of military intervention abroad. This so-called humanitarian imperialism, noted author Diana Johnstone, expressed "perfect continuity with the most aggressive traditions of German policy toward the Balkans as practiced by Berlin in two world wars." In particular, the round condemnation of an entire ethnic group (Serbs) was "reminiscent of the pre-war propaganda against the Jews," she wrote.

But at the Irving-Lipstadt trial the judge and the general public were led to believe that David Irving was the real Nazi, because he gave a speech that inspired a group of skinheads to shout "*Sieg Heil*." Ask Yugoslavians if they think this is worse than the bombing campaign that destroyed their houses, old-age homes, hospitals, outdoor markets, buses, trains, columns of fleeing refugees, and the Chinese Embassy.

The fact of the matter is, there is no reason to accept the demonized image of Irving handed on to us by his political enemies. Moreover, even they concede that his efforts have contributed to the development of fresh historical research. Defense witness Christopher Browning, for example, admitted to Irving that his book, *Hitler's War*, "was the impetus for research . . . on decision-making process and Hitler's role." Meanwhile, Judge Gray had considerable praise to offer Irving the military historian:

"My assessment is that as a military historian, Irving has much to commend him. For his works of military history Irving has undertaken thorough and painstaking research into the archives. He has discovered and disclosed to historians and others many documents which, but for his efforts, might have remained unnoticed for years. It was plain from the way in which he conducted his case and dealt with a sustained and penetrating cross-examination that his knowledge of World War 2 is unparalleled. His mastery of the detail of the historical documents is remarkable. He is beyond question able and intelligent. He was invariably quick to spot the significance of documents which he had not previously seen. Moreover he writes his military history in a clear and vivid style. I accept the favourable assessment by Professor Watt and Sir John Keegan of the calibre of Irving's military history and reject as too sweeping the negative assessment of [defense witness Richard] Evans."

Furthermore, the idea that an ideologically committed historian is intrinsically more susceptible to historical falsification is unfounded. As Michael Parenti, a firmly committed anti-capitalist and an outstanding scholar puts it:

"Many mainstream academics manifest a remarkable detachment from the urgent realities of the world. What is unsettling is how this is treated as a scholarly virtue. Supposedly such detachment helps them to retain their objectivity. In fact, much of the best scholarship comes from ideologically committed scholars. Thus, it is female and African American researchers who respectively have produced the best work on the oppressions of sexism and racism, areas that their white male colleagues never imagined were fit subjects for study. It is they, in their partisan urgency, who have revealed the unexamined sexist and racist presumptions of conventional scholarship in the sciences and social sciences."

And it is David Irving and the Holocaust revisionists who have in *their* partisan urgency revealed a Holocaust dogma masquerading as history. We needn't loathe them. In fact, we ought to help them, for who fails to benefit when the layers of legend and myth encrusting our history are peeled away?

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